DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 424 647 EA 029 413

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TITLE Benefit or Bane? Critique of the Usefulness of Research about Women Superintendents. (A Brief Commentary.)
PUB DATE 1998-04-00
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Diego, CA, April 13-17, 1998).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Behavior; *Educational Administration; Elementary Secondary Education; *Females; Instructional Leadership; Leadership Styles; *Research Utilization; *Superintendents
IDENTIFIERS Gender Issues

ABSTRACT

Various opinions surround the usefulness of research on women superintendents. An analysis of the benefits and the drawbacks of such research is presented here. The text opens with 10 reasons why such research is of use to women and men. The reasons include: women make up over 70 percent of the teaching ranks but only 7 percent of them occupy superintendent chairs; they support the evidence that women can succeed in the superintendency; they reinforce the evidence that women see, value, and know women as superintendents are important role models for other women aspiring to the position; the world differently as compared to men; they help people understand that women's different ways of seeing the world become more important as the job of superintendent undergoes significant changes; and such research helps to explain women administrators' career paths, gender specific expectations of the role, selection, retention, and potential to help change educational administration preparation programs. On the other hand, some men and women are offended by research that is female-specific. They may view such research as essentialist in nature; some women wishing to be superintendent may doubt themselves after comparing themselves to successful women superintendents; and such research is dominated by women. (Contains 53 references.) (RJM)

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BENEFIT OR BANE? CRITIQUE OF THE USEFULNESS OF RESEARCH ABOUT WOMEN SUPERINTENDENTS

(A Brief Commentary)

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"It pissed them off!" he erupted, as he threw the book on the table. "What?" I queried. "The title. The voices of women aspiring to the superintendency (Grogan, 1995). It pissed them off." I tried again, "Who? Why?"

"Okay," he went on, "Here's what happened. I walked into a meeting of elementary principals and showed them the book -- half of them are women -- and the *women* said that the word 'women' in the title really pissed them off!"

I looked at him. His chin was up, a clear indication that he felt he had me. He was a tall, striking man -- a practicing superintendent, and at the same time, one of the students in my class on the superintendency. I liked him. He was thoughtful and challenging.

Instantly, although class had not actually begun, everyone was severely focused on our conversation. Tension wound around expertly binding us together. I sensed his unspoken point. Why had I required them to read a book with the word "women" in the title, if that word made women angry? "Help me understand," I stalled.

He started more slowly, "Well, I asked them why it made them angry, and they said it made them feel like it created a question in people's minds about whether, as women, they had the skills or were good enough for the job. They thought that the word 'women' should be left out of the title, and that the book should be for both men and women."

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I mused, "I wonder if any men have ever been angry when the word 'men' or 'man' showed up in titles. I can think of some, in fact. Do you suppose men worry that people will doubt their skills when the word 'man' shows up in a title?"

Another man in the class cautiously ventured to say, "I must admit, I thought, 'Why do I have to read a book about women?' And then I thought, 'Well, maybe it's so I can know what women face.'"

Finally, a woman with downcast eyes, found her softest tongue, "You know, we women have been reading books about men administrators all of our careers, and we have never questioned doing it." (Superintendency Class 846, Spring 1998)

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With the research of Patricia Schmuck, Flora Ida Ortiz, Charol Shakeshaft, and others, a foundation was laid for a previously neglected area of study -- women in educational administration. As a result, many have joined those interested in the obvious question: If women have dominated the teaching ranks at all levels since the turn of the century (Tyack & Hansot, 1982), why do men occupy 93% of superintendency positions? This question has driven a number of research studies focused specifically on women in the superintendency.

Of what use is such research beyond the need of researchers to answer questions? Yet another question! There are various opinions around the usefulness of research on women, in general, and research on women superintendents specifically. The purpose of this brief commentary is to list a few of the reasons that such research may be helpful or harmful. To that end, the paper is organized in two sections -- "Benefit" and "Bane" -- that draw on some of the literature relative to women superintendency research.

Benefit

While this list is incomplete, I have identified 10 reasons why I believe research about women in the superintendency is of benefit to women and men.

1. Perhaps most obvious, research on women in the superintendency helps answer the glaring question: If women make up over 70% of the teaching ranks, why are there only 7% in the position of superintendent of schools? As Hochshild (1981, p. 1) points out, "[W]hen evidence leads us to expect what does not happen, an investigation may be warranted."

2. Clearly, any research on women in the superintendency is evidence that women can be superintendents, are superintendents, and are able to perform the tasks required of anyone in the role. Without such research, the overwhelmingly prevalent practice of hiring men rather than women has the tendency to create or continue the belief that women must somehow be inferior to men and unable to succeed in the position.

3. The evidence that women can succeed in the position of superintendent, and examples in the literature of women who are succeeding help provide -- at least in print -- the important role models that are so necessary for any woman aspiring to the position. In fact, the lack of role models, mentors, and networks for women are cited in the literature as part of the reason more women do not get into the superintendency (Campbell, 1991; Edson, 1988; Lynch, 1990; Marshall, 1989; Schmuck, 1975; Shakeshaft, 1979, 1989; Tyack & Hansot, 1982; Whitaker & Lane, 1990).

4. There is evidence in the literature that women see, value, and know their world differently than men (see for example, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986; Della Costa, 1973; Edson, 1988; Lather, 1991; Minh-ha, 1989; Ortiz, 1988; Sexton, 1976; Shakeshaft, 1989). The written record, then, in research of the way women see, value, and know is important to all women who may wonder if their way of doing things is somehow inferior or somehow misses the mark. The feminine discourse needs to become an accepted part of the discourse of educational administration in order that women assume their own place in the superintendency (see Grogan, 1996).

5. The different ways that women see, value, and know the world of educational administration are important for the much talked about transformation of the role of the superintendent of schools. This point is convincing given that there is very little in the literature that

informs or supports specific ways that the superintendency may change or is changing (Crowson, 1988). Any research aimed at articulating a new way of performing the role of the superintendency becomes extremely pertinent to all superintendents as they consider changing their practice. In fact, a review of the literature on women in positions of power clearly shows that women bring to their practice many of the characteristics noted as currently missing and necessary for reform.

With this in mind, research on women in the superintendency becomes vastly more important to anyone interested in educational administration. To be sure, calls for public school reform fall at all points along the ideological continuum. Decentralized decision-making is one major thrust of certain reforms, such as site-based management, teacher empowerment (Hallinger, 1992; Mohrman, 1993; Wohlsetter, Smyer, and Mohrman, 1994), joint problem diagnosis (Beer, Eisenstat, and Spector, 1990), high-performance schools (Odden, 1995), and connecting schools and communities (Crowson, 1992). A small portion of the literature on decentralized decision-making focuses on administration and points out how successful superintendents spend time enhancing and supporting various collaborative decision-making efforts (Murphy, 1995) that facilitate reforms, which in turn advance high academic achievement for all students (Odden, 1995).

A second major thrust of reform highlights the moral issues facing public school educators. Some of the issues dealt with are social justice (Purpel, 1989) with an emphasis on academic achievement for every child (Capper, 1993); higher-order democratic values exemplified by equality of input and equality of opportunity (Tyack, 1974); and the notion of an "ethic of care" (Noddings, 1984, 1992) which combines caring, administration, and academic achievement (Beck, 1994). This literature admonishes superintendents and other administrators to care enough about people -- children and adults -- to listen to them, suggesting the replacement of the current pyramidal governance structure with a circle model within which no point is in a superior position (Beck, 1994, p. 84). Despite this thrust, there is no literature to help superintendents transform their practice in a way that addresses these moral issues.

I believe that research on women in the superintendency informs and sensitizes all people, men and women, either seeking or already in the position of superintendent to issues raised by the two major reform thrusts discussed above.

6. Research on women in the superintendency serves the larger purpose of social justice and has the potential to help increase the numbers of women and people of color in the position (see Alston, in press; Jackson, in press; Mendez-Morse, in press; Ortiz, in press; Ortiz & Ortiz, 1995).

7. Given the nation-wide concern that superintendency positions will be emptied faster than they can be filled during the next decade (Brockett, 1996), research reflecting the abilities and availability of women administrators has the potential to open the minds of women as candidates and open the minds of those hiring superintendents. Even an awareness of the numbers of women credentialed and degreed in educational administration -- who have not been hired because of gender bias -- could affect the attitude toward the concern around the supposed lack of candidates. Could it be that the feared dearth of candidates is actually a dearth of male candidates rather than the fuller reality of a larger pool that includes women?

8. Some research on women in the superintendency identifies gender-specific expectations of the role (see Brunner, 1997, 1998, in press). This research prepares women to meet these typically unarticulated and important expectations which at times either prevent their access to the position or their success in the role.

9. Research on women superintendents' career patterns (see Ortiz, 1982), selection (see Brunner, 1995, in press; Chase & Bell, 1990; Hudson, 1991, 1994; Marietti & Stout, 1994), and retention (see Beekley, 1996; Tallerico & Burstyn, 1996; Tallerico, Burstyn, and Poole, 1993) aims to help explain why women administrators are where they are. Such research reveals that career paths, selection, and retention of women in the role can be different than that of men. Knowledge of these differences is valuable for women as they think about moving into the superintendency.

10. Research on women superintendents has the potential to help change educational administration preparation programs. Indeed, as noted in the dialogue that opens this paper, at the very least, it broadens and deepens discussions in educational administration classes.

Bane

My own advocacy for research on women in the superintendency may have limited my thinking, for I find my "Bane" list relatively short. Please contact me if you think of things that should be added to the list.

1. Some people -- men and women -- are offended by research that is female-specific, even when they are comfortable with research that has been done solely on or with men for decades. This discomfort creates anger in some and can create a backlash against women (see Faludi, 1991).

2. Some of the research on women in the superintendency focuses on the differences between men in the position and women in the position. This discussion tends to essentialize women and men. A number of feminists are critical of any essentialized notion of women (see for example, Weiler, 1988) and suggest that no empirical evidence exists to support the notion that women operate in the workplace in a way that is different than men.

3. There is the possibility that women wishing to be superintendents or even women who are superintendents may come to doubt themselves after reading accounts of successful women superintendents who are in no way or only in a few ways like themselves. I am not aware of any research that addresses this possibility.

4. As with all research, there is the possibility that the written accounts of women in the superintendency do not actually match the experiences of women in the positions. Research methods tend to distance researchers from their participants. There have been attempts to work against this tendency (see Brunner, in press; Grogan, in press; Jackson, in press).

5. The seemingly different ways of viewing the role of superintendent of schools (see Benefit # 5) can create contradictions, conflicts, and tensions in educational administration preparation programs. In my view, this is a benefit, not a bane, but there are those who believe it a negative.

6. Not surprisingly, the research done on women in the superintendency has been done primarily, if not only, by other women. This in itself is problematic. If only women find the topic important enough for further investigation, the cries for changes in the role or changes in the number of women in the position will remain marginalized. The normative assumption that only men can be superintendents is far stronger than any female voice advocating that women of all races belong in the position.

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